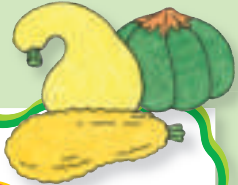


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Tracking Our Class Garden

by Rena Korb

illustrated by Ginna Magee

Genre

Realistic
fiction

Comprehension Skills and Strategy

- Cause and Effect
- Literary Elements:
Theme
- Ask Questions

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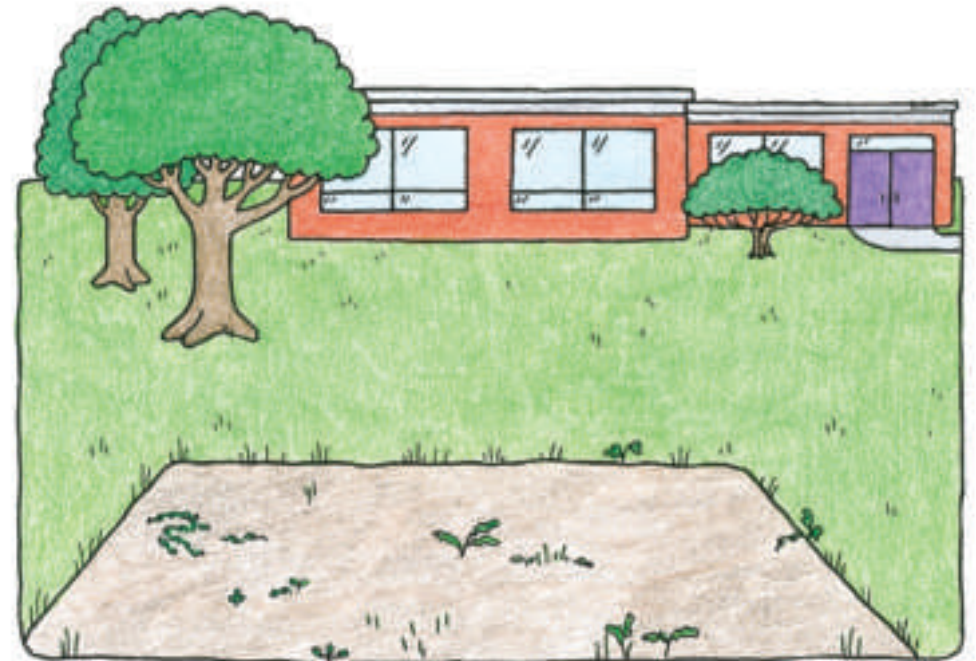


Chapter 1 The New Garden

One warm afternoon in September, Ms. Stinson surprised her fourth-grade class by saying, "We're going to hold class outside. Follow me."

All the students jumped out of their chairs and formed a line. With the sun shining brightly, any chance to go outside was a real treat.

As always, Cal rushed to be first in line. Sandra, the new girl, stood by herself at the end. Everyone else joined the line in groups of friends. As they made their way from the classroom, they talked quietly about what might be in store for them outside.



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Illustrations by Ginna Magee

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Ms. Stinson led the class outside. Melinda looked concerned as she walked through the grass because, after all, she was wearing her new shoes. Darrell cracked jokes to anyone who would listen. "Shh!" ordered Cal, frowning. Sandra simply walked slowly at the back of the line, keeping her eyes down.

Ms. Stinson brought the line to a halt. "Here we are," she said. She gestured to the ground with her hands, and the students looked around curiously. All they saw was a patch of dirt. "Meet your future garden!" exclaimed Ms. Stinson.

The students murmured in confusion. There were no vegetables, no flowers, not even any plants. All they saw was dry, pale dirt with some weeds and a bit of grass.

Melinda raised her hand and asked the question on all their minds. "But where is the garden?"

"We have to grow it," said Ms. Stinson with a broad smile.

The garden was going to be a special class project. After they returned to the classroom, Ms. Stinson divided the class into four groups to research what to plant and how to care for the garden.



Cal instantly took charge by telling about books and Web sites he knew of that they could study. "Great, we've got another teacher," grumbled his group.

Darrell was excited to build a scarecrow with his team of gardeners. "You've got to plant the garden first," Ms. Stinson reminded him.

Melinda had a warning for her group. "I don't like bugs or worms or getting my hands dirty."

Sandra's group hardly noticed her. She sat quietly, with a book open on her lap. On a piece of paper, she sketched creepy crawly bugs.





The children spent an entire month researching gardening. Finally, they were ready for action, and on a crisp fall day they planted their garden. Most everyone came dressed in old jeans and T-shirts that they could get dirty. They got down on their hands and knees in the dirt.

"Yuck!" cried Melinda when she got dirt on her knee. "I'm going to mess up my clothes!"



In the garden, Cal busily yanked up weeds. Sandra seemed to be fascinated with a roly-poly bug. Despite Darrell's silliness—pretending to be a cow eating grass—the class had soon cleared the area. Ms. Stinson turned the dirt over with a shovel while adding peat moss to make the soil richer for plants to grow. The students used their hands to smooth out the soil. Then they took a step back and admired their work.

The next time the class visited the garden, Sandra raised her hand. "What do we do now? It's starting to get cold, and we can't plant anything. I hope we didn't do all this work in vain!"

"We had to prepare the garden so it will be ready for planting next spring," explained Ms. Stinson.

The class eyed the schoolyard. The trees looked almost bare, a gray sky spread above their heads, and the grass was turning brown. It hardly seemed like a season to care about gardening. Could Sandra be right?

Chapter 2 The Garden in Winter



A few days later, Ms. Stinson gave her students a new assignment. She challenged them to find the answer to a question: What can you plant in the fall? The students came back with exciting results. Garlic! Chives! Freezing temperatures and overnight frosts would not kill these bulbs as they nestled underground.

"What about daffodils?" asked Melinda, remembering her research. When Ms. Stinson agreed, Melinda's face lit up. Soon the class got to work planting.



Even in the cold, snow, and ice of winter, the students visited the garden. Bundled up, they gathered together to talk about the garden.

"What do you think our plants are doing right now?" Ms. Stinson asked.

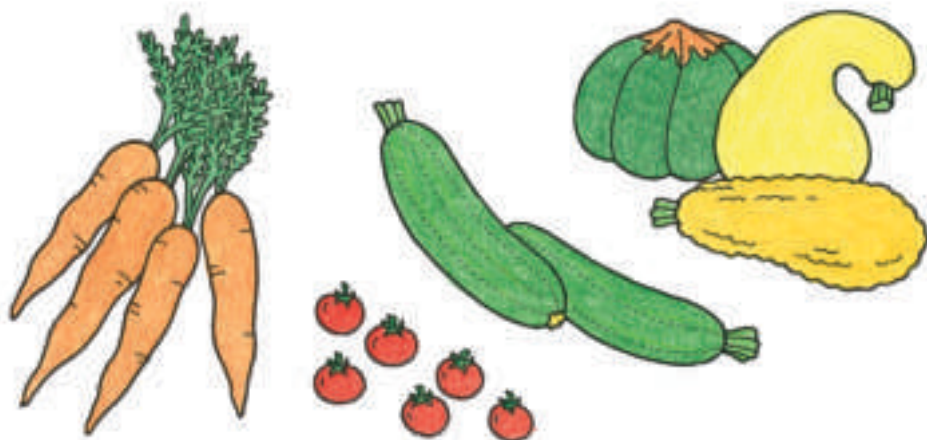
"They are sleeping through the winter so they can be strong in the spring," said Cal.

"Yes," Darrell exclaimed. "They're kind of like bears that hibernate in the winter."

"Well, I think they are cold down there in the ground," said Sandra. "Just like I am. This garden isn't any fun."

"Oh, Sandra," Melinda cried. "I know we will have fun together in the spring picking the beautiful daffodils!"

Sandra shrugged. It was hard coming to a new school, but maybe she could find a friend in Melinda.



There wasn't much to do in the garden during the winter, so the class got ready for the coming spring. Each group had to decide what to plant.

At first, Cal wanted to plant cucumbers, but when he realized that everyone else in his group wanted carrots, he agreed. Melinda's group decided to plant cherry tomatoes.

Sandra's group decided on acorn and butternut squash. "They won't be ready until next fall," said Ms. Stinson.

"It'll be just in time to decorate the Thanksgiving table," offered Sandra quietly. She smiled when her whole group nodded and smiled back at her.

Darrell's group selected zucchini squash. "We are going to try to grow a zucchini as big as a baseball bat!" Darrell exclaimed.

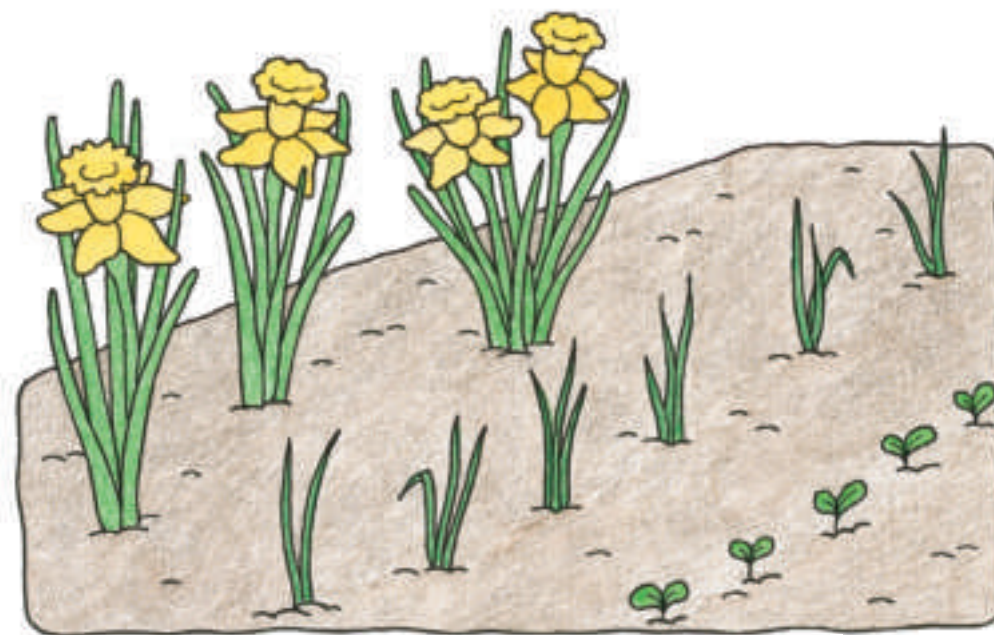


Chapter 3 Spring Arrives!



Spring had almost arrived. The weather turned warmer, and the class checked the garden every day. Soon, the children could see that the plants were growing!

The tips of the garlic and the onions they had also decided to plant poked through the ground. The green shoots of the chives stretched toward the sky, and the daffodils grew thick, dark-green stalks. On the day the daffodils bloomed into frilly yellow flowers, Melinda and Sandra picked a small bouquet for the classroom. Ms. Stinson said it was finally time to plant the rest of the garden.





On planting day the students, including Melinda, came to school dressed in their old jeans and T-shirts. Each group picked out a planting spot in the garden.

Cal and his group dug several shallow holes with their fingers. The carrot seeds were tiny, no bigger than the heads of pins! The group sprinkled in the seeds and then took turns making sure all the seeds had enough space.



Unlike the carrot seeds, the zucchini seeds needed to be bunched together without touching. Darrell took charge because he really wanted to grow a zucchini big enough to set a world record.

The acorn and butternut squash group drew circles in the soil as big as dinner plates. Everyone gathered around and took turns poking one seed into the ground at the center of each circle.

The tomato group did not plant seeds, since Melinda's grandmother's gardening club had donated some seedlings for them to use. They placed the small tomato plants into holes they had dug in the ground and gently piled up dirt around the roots.

Then the children raced to fill up their watering cans. They stood over the rows and let the water sink deep into the ground.



After planting day, the students visited the garden regularly. They kept the soil damp and free of any weeds.

Each group had different problems to solve. The tomatoes started to slump over, so the students put wooden stakes into the ground and tied up the plants with twine. The carrots were growing too close together, and the students had to thin out the rows by pulling some of the tiny seedlings out of the ground.

And how all the plants grew! The green carrot tops developed into lacy leaves, and the squash plants began to spread along the ground. And the students discovered that tiny green tomatoes liked to hide underneath the plants' leaves.



Chapter 4 Disaster Strikes!



But one day, Darrell noticed that the leaves and stems of one of the zucchini plants were wilting. The students gave the plant extra water because they thought it was thirsty, but when they went out to check the next day, the plant didn't seem any better. Then another zucchini stalk started to wilt.

Ms. Stinson knelt down to inspect the sick plants, and when she stood up, the class could tell from the look on her face that it was serious. "Some kind of bug is eating our plants. Let's try and figure out a way to make the bug go away." The students jumped quickly into their research.





"Garlic spray!" cried Darrell, as he jumped up with the book still in his hand. He explained that a mixture, including water, garlic, onion, and red pepper, might be strong enough to keep the bugs away.

After making the mixture, the students poured it into spray bottles and squirted the zucchini plants, but the bugs didn't go away.

Cal thought maybe beetles were attacking the plants, so the children took turns sitting next to the young plants. When they found a bug, they picked it off, and even Melinda took her turn.



No matter what the class did, however, the zucchini plants didn't get better. One day, something terrible happened. One of the plants died. So the class continued to hunt for answers. Could insects be boring through the zucchini and eating the plants from the inside? The children examined the stems of the unhealthy plants and found several small holes!

"We're going to have to try to cut the borers out," said Ms. Stinson. She made a slit in the stem, and inside sat a fat white caterpillar, which she removed.

"Gross!" yelled Melinda.

Ms. Stinson repeated this process with the other sick plants. Then she placed a mound of dirt around the slit to keep the plant growing.

For the next few days the students eagerly ran outside to check on their bug-free zucchini plants, but to their surprise, a few of the plants failed to perk up. Then another plant died.

"Well, class," Ms. Stinson sighed, getting up from her knees in the garden. "I'm afraid there's nothing more we can do for the zucchini plants."



Then a small voice spoke up. "I've got an idea," said Sandra. Everyone turned to look at her, eager to hear what she had to say.

"I got this idea from a book I was reading . . ." Sandra's voice trailed off.

"Please tell us more about it, Sandra," said Ms. Stinson. Melinda looked at Sandra and gave her a smile of encouragement.

So Sandra told them about making reflectors from aluminum foil. For some reason, the reflectors often kept borers away from plants. "Maybe they don't like the sunlight shining off the foil," Sandra guessed.



Ms. Stinson asked Sandra to get materials from the classroom to make the reflectors. When Sandra came back, she demonstrated how to make a reflector. She cut a square of foil and poked a hole at its middle. Then she placed the hole gently over one of the plants, slid the foil down, and pressed it flat to the ground. The class did the same to the rest of the zucchini plants.

For the next week, Ms. Stinson led the class outside to check the garden. Each day was the same—no more borers! Finally, Ms. Stinson made an announcement. "I think all the bugs are finally gone!"

The kids crowded around Sandra with cries of "Good job!" and "You saved the zucchini!"

As they walked back to the classroom, Cal hurried to catch up with Sandra. "That was so neat," he said. "Could you show me how you figured that out?"

"Sure," Sandra said with a big smile. "I'll show you the book, and you can even borrow it from me if you'd like."

Chapter 5 The Harvest



The class spent the rest of the spring taking care of the garden. The week before school let out for the summer, they had their first harvest. All the students worked together to gather the ripened crop.

Under the bright sun, the class picked the long stalks of the chives. To find the garlic and onions, they looked for green stems sticking straight up in the air. Then they wrapped their hands around the stalks and pulled the bulbs gently from the ground.



Melinda's group led the search for the cherry tomatoes. They picked only the tomatoes that looked red all over, leaving the green ones on the stems. To see if the carrots were ready, Cal grabbed a carrot top sticking out of the ground. When he pulled out a long orange carrot, the class knew it would be a good harvest. Darrell's group had decided against growing one big zucchini. "Smaller ones taste better," he explained.

Everyone did some snacking before they piled up the crisp crop in a wheelbarrow and pushed it to Ms. Stinson's car. The vegetables would go to a nearby food bank for people in need of food.





On the last day of school, the class carried out its final task. The children planted a new crop of vegetables. Most of the crop would ripen over the summer.

"But who's going to take care of our garden?" Melinda asked.

"I'll be here all summer long," Ms. Stinson told the class. "And you are welcome to help out whenever you can."

It turned out to be one of the hottest summers on record! Still, the students, often with their families, came out to work in the garden. They didn't care that the sun was blazing hot or that sweat ran down their faces. They wanted to take care of their prized plants.

In July the ground started to dry out, and it seemed that no amount of water was enough for the plants. Sandra, Darrell, Cal, and Melinda got together and came up with an idea. They covered the plant beds with dry grass clippings to help keep in moisture.

As the summer went on, the plants grew larger and stronger, and brightly colored vegetables covered green stalks. In August, Ms. Stinson invited the children and their families to a party. After they all helped gather and wash the fresh vegetables, everyone sat down to a garden picnic.



That fall the fourth graders returned as fifth graders. They knew another class would take over their garden, but Ms. Stinson had one more surprise for them. She asked them to join her new fourth-grade class to harvest the final crop of the year: the acorn and butternut squash.

As they worked, the older students gave the younger students helpful tips. The fifth graders remembered when Ms. Stinson first introduced them to the garden—a big patch of messy dirt. Now it was a rich garden that had produced good food, hard work, and new friends, and it had been an amazing year of gardening fun.





Indoor Gardening

An egg carton filled with potting soil makes a nice place to plant seeds and grow them indoors. A variety of seeds can be planted. The different seeds can be identified by sticking a flat wooden stick with the plant's name on it at the edge of each egg cup.

The seeds need to be planted just underneath the surface of the soil in each egg cup so that they can sprout. As you know, plants need water to grow. An old, clean spray bottle filled with water is great for watering plants. The fine mist of the spray will keep the soil moist, and the plants will grow best in a warm spot.

Eventually, tiny green shoots will pop out of the soil, and the plants will need water and sunlight. Soon the tiny green shoots will grow into stalks with two leaves. At this point, the plants will need more room to grow. A larger pot, careful handling, and soil around the roots will help the plants stay healthy.



Reader Response

1. Why did the students do research? What happened as a result of their research? Write your answers in a chart similar to the one below.

Why did it happen?	What happened?

2. What questions did you have about gardening as you read this book? How did this book help you answer your questions? Where could you go to find more information on gardening?
3. Reread page 17 and think about what the borers did to the zucchini plants. What do you think the word *borer* means?
4. How did Sandra change from the beginning of the story to the end?

